Re-contextualising the Object: Using New Technologies to Reconstruct Lost Interiors of Medieval Islamic Buildings

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Abstract

There has been a common theme in the display of Islamic architectural fragments. De-contextualised and alone, so often the rather opaque provenance and questions as to how the objects became detached from their original location have led to a profound disconnect between the objects and the buildings from which they came. This article proposes a new way of displaying and understanding such items, as well as confronting the issues of origin head on. The focus is on one case study; the Ilkhanid lustre tiles from the tomb of Shaykh ʿAbd al-Samad in Natanz, Iran. A number of the tiles are in major collections around the world, with little sense of the cumulative appearance of the complete composition, or the other decorative elements of the building. By using low-cost building materials and high quality printing it is possible to recreate a sense of the Ilkhanid-era appearance of the interior of the Natanz tomb. The original scale, context and epigraphic programme will become clear, and the objects will no longer be viewed in isolation. This article challenges several curatorial conventions, and bridges the divide between the objects and the building of which they originally formed an integral part. The limited cost, as well as comparative ease and simplicity, demonstrates a new way of approaching the presentation of architectural fragments ripped from their original location.

Keywords

Natanz, Ilkhanid, lustre tiles, provenance, exhibitions, museums

Word count

6529

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Introduction

There has been something of a common theme in the display of Islamic architectural fragments in the main museums of Europe and North America since the major *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* exhibition in Munich in 1910.[1] Such exhibitions generally consist of a cool white space containing objects, singly or in groups, with small text blocks giving basic catalogue information. In surprisingly homogenous spaces,[2] the items are de-contextualised and alone. The often rather opaque provenance, and concomitant questions as to how the items became detached from their original context and entered the art market in the first place, have led to a profound disconnect between the objects and the buildings from which they came.

This article is an attempt to address some of the main problems relating to the presentation of Islamic architectural fragments in museums.[3] A methodological framework, elucidated through the prism of a specific structure and its glazed revetments, examines the de-contextualisation and questionable legal status as a result of the removal, and subsequent export and dispersal, of items. In addition, there is a major disconnect between the language written on objects, and the ability of the great majority of museum visitors to either read Arabic, or if they do, to understand the significance of the specific Qur'anic texts, often only partially preserved, which are depicted on the tiles. For these reasons it is proposed to recreate the interior space of a single building, namely the tomb at the *khanqah* of ʿAbd al-Samad of 707/1307, near Isfahan in Iran.[4] ʿAbd al-Samad was the leading Suhrawardi Sheikh and died in 1299. It is a small cruciform-plan tomb, built during the Ilkhanid period, which was formerly decorated with a revetment of lustre and monochrome turquoise tiles, including a dado, the *mihrab* and areas of the cenotaph. Almost all of these tiles had been removed by the late-nineteenth century. Such a project will involve bringing together images of the known tiles, dispersed around the world in a number of different museums, as well as the stucco inscription band, engaged columns and plaster muqarnas ceiling, all of which remain intact. This will allow for the recreation the original appearance of the space as accurately as possible, so that it can be seen for the first time in over a century.

Stefan Weber has noted the difficulty in connecting objects in galleries to their original context, a problem which is commonly reported in visitor surveys.[5] The multi-layered approach proposed in this article demonstrates a way to address this, and other major issues concerning the acquisition, trade, display and de-contextualisation of fragments of Islamic architecture displayed in museums. One of the primary aims of this article is to present a practical way to confront and acknowledge the key issues concerning the origins and acquisition of medieval objects in museums head on. This is in contrast to the more common approach of hiding behind the lack of a retroactivity clause in the UNESCO convention of 1970.[6] This has been commonly interpreted as making it acceptable to handle and display stolen and looted goods, as long as they were not acquired recently. However, rather than propose some sort of unworkable restitution scheme,[7] which would be both impractical and unhelpful, the idea is to acknowledge

and present the historical facts, as far as they are known. This can be achieved by creating a small exhibition of images, objects and text, so as to help demonstrate how the major collections of Islamic art were created and expanded in the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. The intersection of public institutions, private collecting and donating, and the commercial market comprising dealers and auction houses represents a triumvirate which can be examined through the study of the life of objects after their removal from buildings. In the context of this proposed exhibition schema, it is possible to both contextualise the corpus of material from the tomb, and tell the individual stories of specific tiles, including details around the removal, sale, acquisition, and subsequent display in different contexts during the modern era. This, admittedly rather polemical, approach can shine a light on how they have been valued, perceived and understood in the century or more since the creation of the idea of 'Islamic Art' and the public display of architectural elements from buildings broadly understood as being Islamic by virtue of either their patron or function.[8]

Given the logistical constraints, and the number of lost, or, in the case of all the star and cross ones from the 1.35 metre high dado beneath the inscription band with the defaced birds, unidentified tiles, it is not possible to reunite them all in any one place. For similar reasons, as well as a probable lack of desire to set a precedent by the various owners, there is no chance of all the tiles of which the whereabouts is known being returned to the shrine in Natanz anytime soon. Even if such a thing were to become possible, far fewer people would be able to see the tiles due to reasons of accessibility. Alongside the rare situation of being able to demonstrate the specific building from which a number of tiles were removed, another reason for choosing to build an exhibition around a structure in Natanz, over so many others, is to change the perception of Natanz itself. It is a place which is now far better known in the public consciousness for being the site of a nuclear enrichment facility under constant threat of attack by hostile nations, rather than a place of veneration and artistic excellence.

The Lustre Tiles

Unlike most structures, a significant number of tiles in major museums are known, or in some cases suspected, to have come from the Natanz shrine. It is for this reason above all others that this structure has be chosen as a case study, as both the plunder of the site and subsequent diffusion of the tiles can be demonstrated with a greater degree of accuracy than is the case with most Islamic tile work of the medieval period.

The tiles are the most famous elements of the tomb, due largely to the extensive publication of examples from the inscription frieze originally located above the dado,[9] and the widespread distribution of the tiles across the major Islamic art museums of Europe and North America. However, striking as the tiles are, the writing on each individual tile forms only a small part of a larger inscription. More importantly, the lack of an ability to read Arabic on the part of the great majority of visitors to the museums which display the tiles results in a major disconnect and alienation for most viewers. By not only bringing images of all the known tiles together, but also giving the missing text, in translation, and the meaning and significance of the various different Qur'anic quotes,[10] the entire audience can gain a fuller understanding of the entire space. It will become clear that the tomb, like so many other examples of Islamic architecture, is a building which speaks, but a clear understanding of that cannot emerge when viewing individual tiles in isolation, or without a full presentation of the epigraphy. Such material, when available at all, is generally in obscure and hard to find scholarly publications,[11] and is not

presented to the general viewing public, despite the central importance of the meaning of the texts.

Removal and Dispersal of Tiles

As early as 1863, tiles from the Natanz shrine are known to have been removed and acquired by European collectors. Some tiles, the present location of which is unknown, are known to have been in the possession of the French minister Count Julian de Rochechouart.[12] At that time enough were intact for Rochechouart to admire their incomparable beauty, but the majority appear to have been removed by 1875.[13] Lines of mortar revealing where on the walls the tiles were, visible in photographs of the interior of the tomb,[14] allow for an understanding of the placement of at least some of the different elements of the glazed mural revetments now dispersed around the world. In 1876 the Qajar government of Iran issued an edict to ensure that religious buildings were not plundered, and from that date the provenance of tiles in European collections became either increasingly ambiguous or anonymous.[15] Images from the late 1970s show several of the monochrome turquoise cross-shaped tiles of the dado[16] [figure 1], and at the time of writing 89 full or partial sections of the monochrome turquoise star tiles remain in situ.[17] The use of such plain cross tiles making tracing the dispersal of the missing tiles through the art market very difficult. There are plans to produce new replacement lustre tiles for the interior of the tomb in Natanz, but as of yet no one has been commissioned to produce them.[18]

Other major missing elements include the large shallow recessed arch over the *mihrab* and the tiles above and to the sides of it, where now only the mortar remains.

Sheila Blair

Figure 1: The south wall of the interior of the tomb of ʿAbd al-Samad in 1978

The Surviving Corpus

Of the twenty-plus tiles known to have survived from the inscription freeze above the dado,[19] there are examples in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and in the Victoria and Albert Museum, along with two in the British Museum. In addition, the Hetjens Museum in

Dusseldorf has three, the Museum für Islamischekunst in Berlin, the Österreiches Museum in Vienna and the Musée de Sèvres all have pieces, while the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris has six full tiles.[20] Three further examples are held in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg in Russia.[21] In addition to several privately held examples, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford also has one tile from the same frieze, but unlike most of the other examples which are square, it is quite narrow.[22]

Epigraphic Content

In addition to the date of shawwal 707, seen on the frieze tile in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York[23] [figure 4], the fragmentary Qur'anic inscriptions on the published tiles allow for a partial reconstruction of the epigraphic content of the tomb. One of the tiles in the Victoria and Albert Museum[24] has the final two letters of *al-Insan* 76:1 and the first two words of 76:2. One of the tiles from the Godman collection, acquired by the British Museum in 1983,[25] has the final three words of 76:9. Another tile from the same frieze in the British Museum[26] has the middle section of 76:11. In addition, one of the three tiles in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg has the middle section of 76:16. This Medinan *sura* speaks of how man is tested and what the results will be for the evil doers and for the righteous.[27] It is likely that the entire *sura* was included in the 36 centimetre high band of tiles above the 1.35 metre high dado of star and cross tiles, now only visible from the grout lines on the wall of the tomb, as almost all the tiles have been removed.[28]

One of the largest groupings of tiles from the main lustre frieze is in Paris. There are five full-size and three broken, but probably all originally full-size, tiles in the Louvre.[29] Although the original installation height of the band is known exactly, the tiles in the Louvre are displayed high up near the ceiling, rather than at the originally intended eye height, at 1.35m. This makes them hard to view and further alters the viewers' perception of them. Subsequently a corner tile, possibly from the *mihrab* recess, was purchased in 1889.[30] It features a narrow spidery band of cursive inscription, as well as a somewhat larger cobalt blue band in relief. In addition to the underglaze blue, used for the relief inscription in the upper section and the vegetal decoration in the lower section, underglaze turquoise was also used, for the background decoration of the inscription [figure 2]. While the tiles of the main frieze also feature turquoise underglaze colourant, it is far more controlled in the corner tile than in the large square tiles of the frieze.

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Figure 2: Corner tile from the tomb now in the Louvre (AD4973)

Alongside the mostly square frieze tiles, the upper section of the *mihrab* niche, as well as a number of the rectangular tiles which formed the border around it, are held in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.[31] The niche features *basmala*, followed by Qur'an 17:78, followed by the date 707, with Qur'an 55 running round the edge in a spidery brown cursive script.[32] The niche consists of two sections and can be seen to have been fired upside down, as the cobalt blue glaze colourant has run over the upper inscription band [figure 3]. It is details such as this which can be highlighted in the text blocks in the corridor to aid in the understanding of the

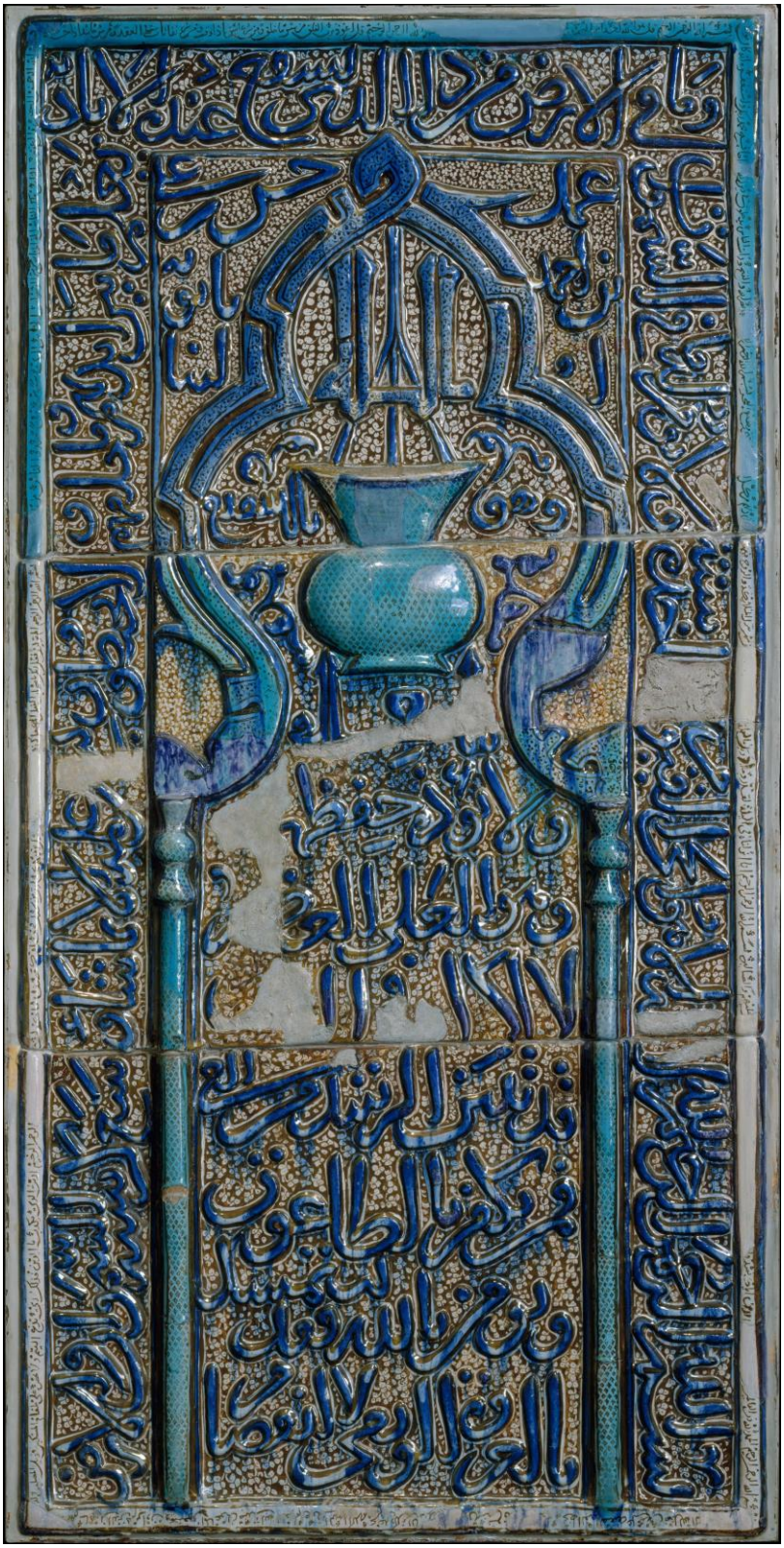
production of the different elements of the building and to connect the audience with the craftsmen and their practices, in contrast to the usual focus on the patron who paid for the building. Although the lower section of the *mihrab* is reported to be in the Victoria and Albert Museum, this piece is unlikely to have actually come from the Natanz shrine.[33]

The original border, 15 centimetres wide and running all around the *mihrab* set into the south wall, would have been circa 480 centimetres long.[34] Despite the fact that so many of the tiles remain lost it is still possible to recreate the overall appearance of the border with the remaining tiles and the knowledge of the text of the majority of the inscription.[35] Seven of the border tiles now in the Victoria and Albert Museum comprise the majority of the final six verses of Qur'an 36[36] [figure 3]. Close examination of the mortar lines around the *mihrab* reveals that there were originally thirteen tiles around the edge, five on each side and three along the top. In addition, three tiles in the form of a large *mihrab*, signed by the same craftsmen named at the top of the engaged columns, Ḥasan ibn ʻAlī ibn Aḥmad Bābawayh, and presumed to be from the cenotaph[37] are in the Metropolitan Museum in New York[38] [figure 4]. The tile was removed from the site in circa 1879, but the museum records only show it having come from a "mosque near Isfahan" and that they were removed by Chirol, the foreign editor of the Times.[39] This makes the removal of the panel an act in contravention of the 1876 edict prohibiting such actions, and thus it was illegally acquired.[40] By placing an image of the panel on the cenotaph in the tomb space, it is possible to compare the micro and macro scale of similar motifs in different media. The most striking example, alongside the epigraphy, is the style of capitals depicted atop the engaged columns on both the walls of the tomb [figure 5] and the tile panel. Such examples of aesthetic unity across scale within the original structure are far harder to demonstrate when the item is viewed in isolation. While it may be assumed that the sides of the sarcophagus were also tiled, there is no evidence upon which to base a reconstruction, so, like the type of lustre star tiles used on the dado, uncertainty remains.

Above the *mihrab* niche there is a large shallow recessed arch and although no tiles remain in situ, two of the tiles from the cavetto-like edge of the recess survive, one in Berlin and the other in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon.[41] These both feature the same spidery cursive lustre text around the edge and regularly spaces knotted true and fictive *alif* and *lam* hastae in the relief inscription in underglaze blue.

Richard McClary / Victoria & Albert Museum

Figure 3: Partial reconstruction of the original appearance of the mihrab in the tomb of ʻAbd al-Samad



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 4: Three-piece mihrab panel from the cenotaph of ʻAbd al-Samad

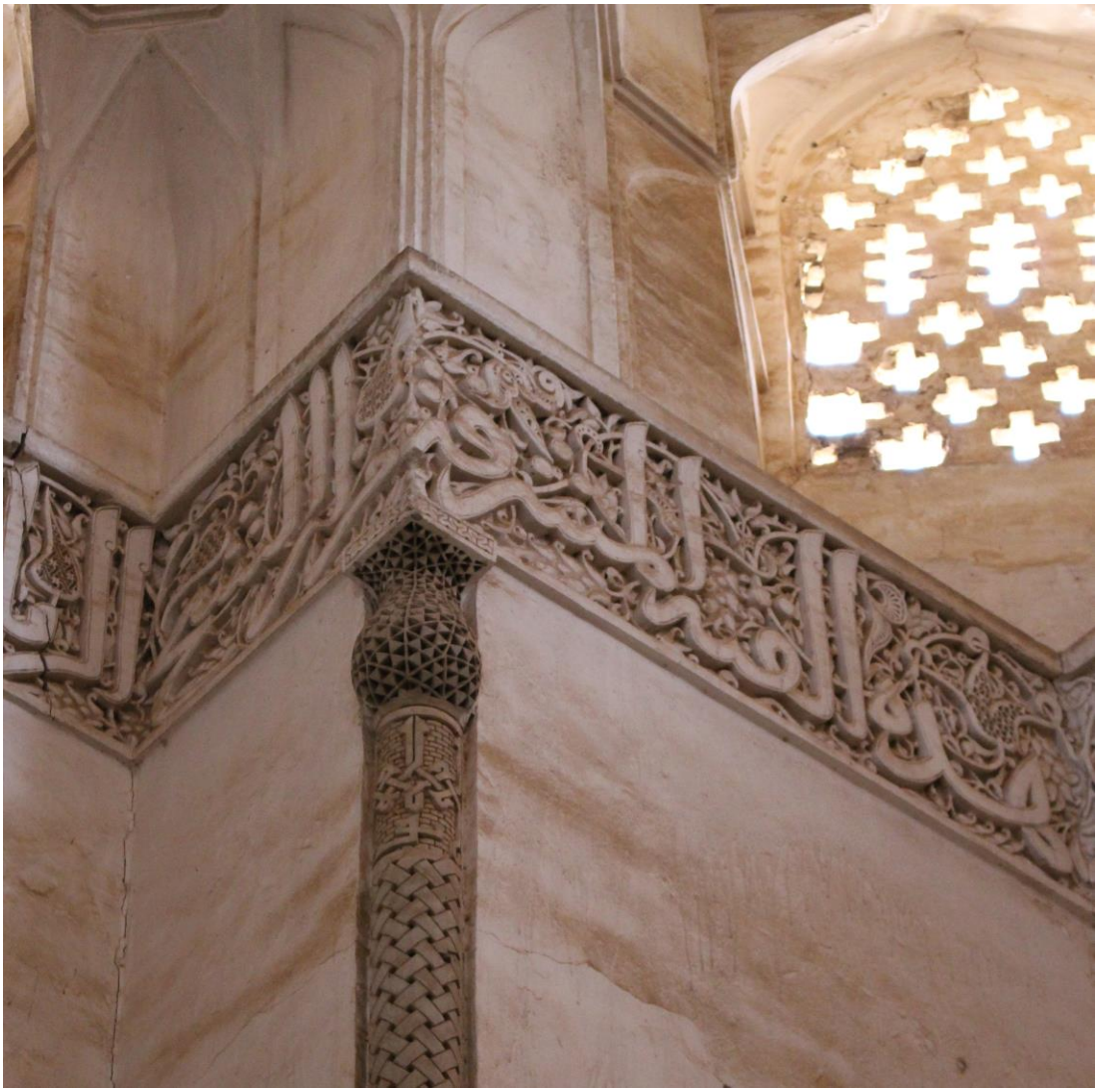


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Figure 5: Upper inscription band, and engaged column with part of the craftsman's name

The Metropolitan Museum of Art / British Museum / Victoria & Albert Museum

Figure 6: Three of the dispersed tiles from the frieze, one on the left featuring the date (MET 12.44) and the others parts of Qur'an 76 (BM OA 1122 and V&A 1485/1876)

The interior of the tomb features incised patterns in the rising joints of the brickwork, with a combination of the standard rectangular format X with a circle in the middle, as seen in much of the earlier Seljuq buildings, along with some more complex variants of this type and several square format epigraphic patterns, reading *Allāh* [figure 7]. These are currently only visible around the *mihrab,* and the area with missing tiles shows that the main central section of the *mihrab* niche is a later addition, as there is a construction break either side. The brickwork added later, to support the mortar and tiles, does not feature any incised patterns in the rising joints. The Ilkhanid period was the final era of incised rising joint plugs,[42] as later buildings, especially in the Timurid period, either used glazed plug inserts, or more commonly, covered the brick work entirely. The location of the decorative brick plugs underneath the area where the lustre frieze band was located, suggests a somewhat more palimpsestuous nature to the building than previously thought, with multiple phases of construction and decoration, prior to the later addition of the monochrome and lustre tiles.[43] This initial phase of decoration may be assumed to date from very soon after the death of ʻAbd al-Samad in 699/1299-1300, and before the 707/1308 date on the lustre frieze.[44]

Highlighting these details in the exhibition, which have limited commercial appeal or value and thus remain in situ, will show another element of the decoration which survives, and which formed part of the earliest decorative vocabulary of the building, prior to the addition of the glazed tiles.

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Figure 7: Brick rising joint decoration located behind the lustre frieze to the left of the mihrab

Exhibition layout and design

Without a specific budget, location,[45] or knowledge of the items available for display, it is impossible to fully cost and design the installation of the exhibition. However, it can be demonstrated how this approach to display and re-contextualisation is both practical and cost effective in comparison with most temporary exhibitions of Islamic art. These all require loans and shipping of large numbers of objects around the world, all still out of their original context. The basic form of the space can be constructed using standard dimensional lumber and 10 millimetre thick sheets of MDF (Multiple density fibreboard).[46] The same size cruciform floor plan as the tomb in Natanz, being just under six metres square, but with a reduced height depending on the space into which the exhibition is to be installed, is the basis for the design. The muqarnas ceiling will be printed and applied to a flat ceiling, with several full-size plaster cells reproduced and displayed in the final display area, alongside a drawing of the plan of the ceiling in order to aid visitors understanding of the nature of such a distinctively Islamic construction.

Alongside the site-specific design and construction of the exhibition space and the writing of text, there are a number of specific actions which would need to be undertaken in order to complete this exhibition. These include the recording of drone footage of the exterior of the complex in Natanz as well as taking high resolution photographs of the stucco inscriptions inside the tomb. Full-size plaster models of some of the muqarnas cells would need to be fabricated, and high resolution images of all the known tiles from the building would need to be sourced from the institutions which hold them. All these elements would then need to be used in order to create a digital 3D model of the tomb interior. It is this model which would form the basis of the reconstruction of the inscription band and the source for generating the printed sheets which would be applied to the interior of the tomb space.

An important element of the project would be to supply the image files and funding to allow for the temporary installation of the lower part of the printed wall panels, featuring the tiles, in the tomb at Natanz.[47] This would allow for the interior of the building to have the visual aesthetic, if not the actual plundered elements, that it had for the first half millennia or more of its existence. In lieu of returning the items, it seems that jointly funding the creation and installation of the composite images is the least that the institutions which now hold the various tiles which were ‘liberated’ from the building in the mid to late nineteenth century could do.

Room 1: The Corridor

The entrance to the corridor through which visitors would pass in order to enter the central exhibition space will feature a reduced scale image of the entrance portal of the complex in full colour. This portal is described by Sheila Blair, the foremost authority on the building, as one of the most spectacular façades in Iranian architecture.[48] As well as providing an exhibition space for images related to the site, the corridor is intended to recreate the somewhat claustrophobic sense of entering and moving towards the tomb in Natanz.[49] The corridor accessing the simulacrum of the shrine will be a space where a combination of text blocks, maps and images of the complex can be mounted on the walls, illuminated by spot lights. The text and image panels, covering the production, meaning, removal, sale and display of the tiles, as well as the complex of which the tomb forms part, and the wider historical context, would be based on established scholarship. However, they would be written in a plain and accessible manner, aimed at the non-specialist, but interested, general public.[50]

One of the text blocks, accompanied by images of the individuals involved, will lay out the history of acquisition of the tiles, as well as give information about the individuals involved, such as Robert Murdoch Smith[51] and Count Julian de Rochechouart. These panels will act as an honest commentary on the ways in which this material was acquired and dispersed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Other panels will consist of current as well as historical photographs showing the denuded nature of the interior of the tomb as it now stands.[52] Alongside context, provenance, inscriptions and materiality, it is also possible to address issues of living history, evidenced by the careful defacing of the birds on the square tiles from the inscription frieze [figure 6]. It is commonly noted that there are no living creatures depicted in religious spaces in Islam, yet examples such as the birds from Natanz provide an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that the reality was more fluid and subject to changes and interpretation over time. Acceptable at the time it was built, at some point afterwards, all the birds were very carefully defaced, reflecting a changed view. By highlighting this point in a text block, a more nuanced, less binary view can be presented to the public. The end of the corridor will have a large projector screen showing drone footage of the surrounding complex, including close up footage of the minaret and the surrounding countryside, running on a short loop. The corridor will be, at 7.5 meters by 3.75 metres, very close in size to the one which accesses the tomb in Natanz. This will allow for the creation of a similar sensory experience, and provide a transitional space between the mock-up of the tomb and the main gallery space in which it is set up. By retaining the shift in orientation, the significance of *qibla* orientation, and its effect on the layout of buildings can be demonstrated in reality to visitors as well as commented on.

Room 2: The Tomb

The tomb in Natanz is dated by the upper carved stucco inscription which gives, alongside verses 162, 163 and 164 of *sura* 3 of the Qur'an,[53] the name of the ʿAbd al-Samad and the date of 707 (1307-8).[54] This upper stucco inscription band, and the name of the craftsman spread across the engaged columns in interlaced Kufic [figure 5], both start in the southwest corner.[55] As a result, it may be assumed that the lustre tile frieze also started at the same place. If it can be assumed that the dated tile from the frieze, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was at the end of the inscription band, then the verses from *sura* 76 are likely to have started at the same point as the upper inscriptions, and the full inscription can be put on the wall, with images of the known tiles places in something approximating their original locations in the sequence. These will be giclée printed in full colour, while the rest, consisting of digital recreations of the inscription in a similar style should be printed in a less vibrant colour tone. This approach will demonstrate the extent of the losses, as well as allow the original material to stand out. Figure 9 shows a partial mock-up of how the south wall of the tomb area of the exhibition might appear. It has a repeating pattern of star and cross tiles of the kind most likely to have been originally installed, as well as images of the frieze tiles, surviving *mihrab* tiles, engaged columns and sections of the large upper stucco inscription band.

The tomb itself is 5.95 meters square inside,[56] and this is the size that would be used for the footprint of the main aspect of the proposed exhibition. To save height, and allow for the installation of the exhibition in a larger number of spaces, the muqarnas ceiling can be printed onto a flat surface [figure 8]. The areas where the eight windows are located, four large in the middle, and four narrower ones in the corners, can be laser-cut in order to allow for the introduction of diffused light into the space.[57]

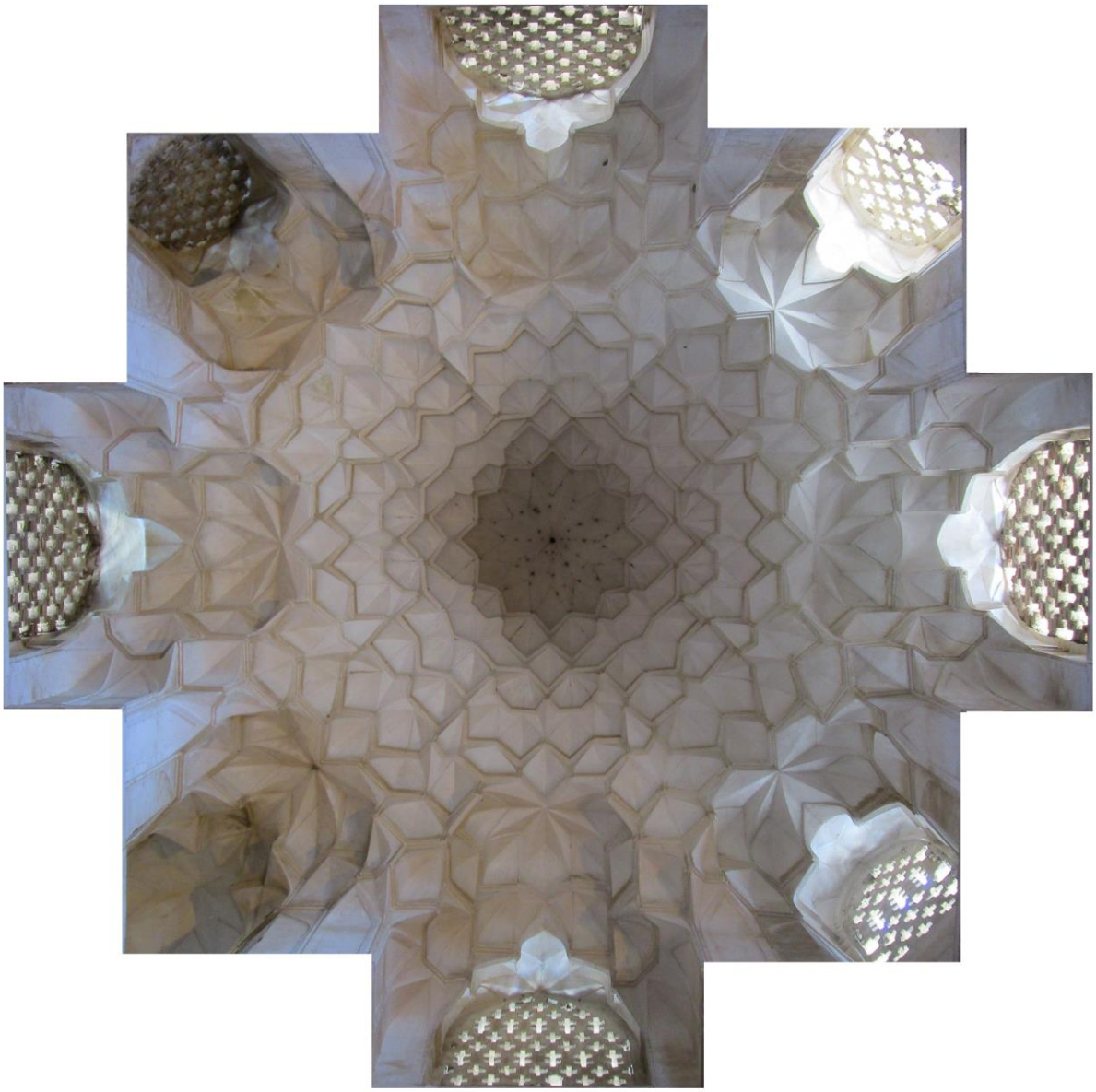

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Figure 8: Image of muqarnas ceiling to be printed and applied to exhibition ceiling

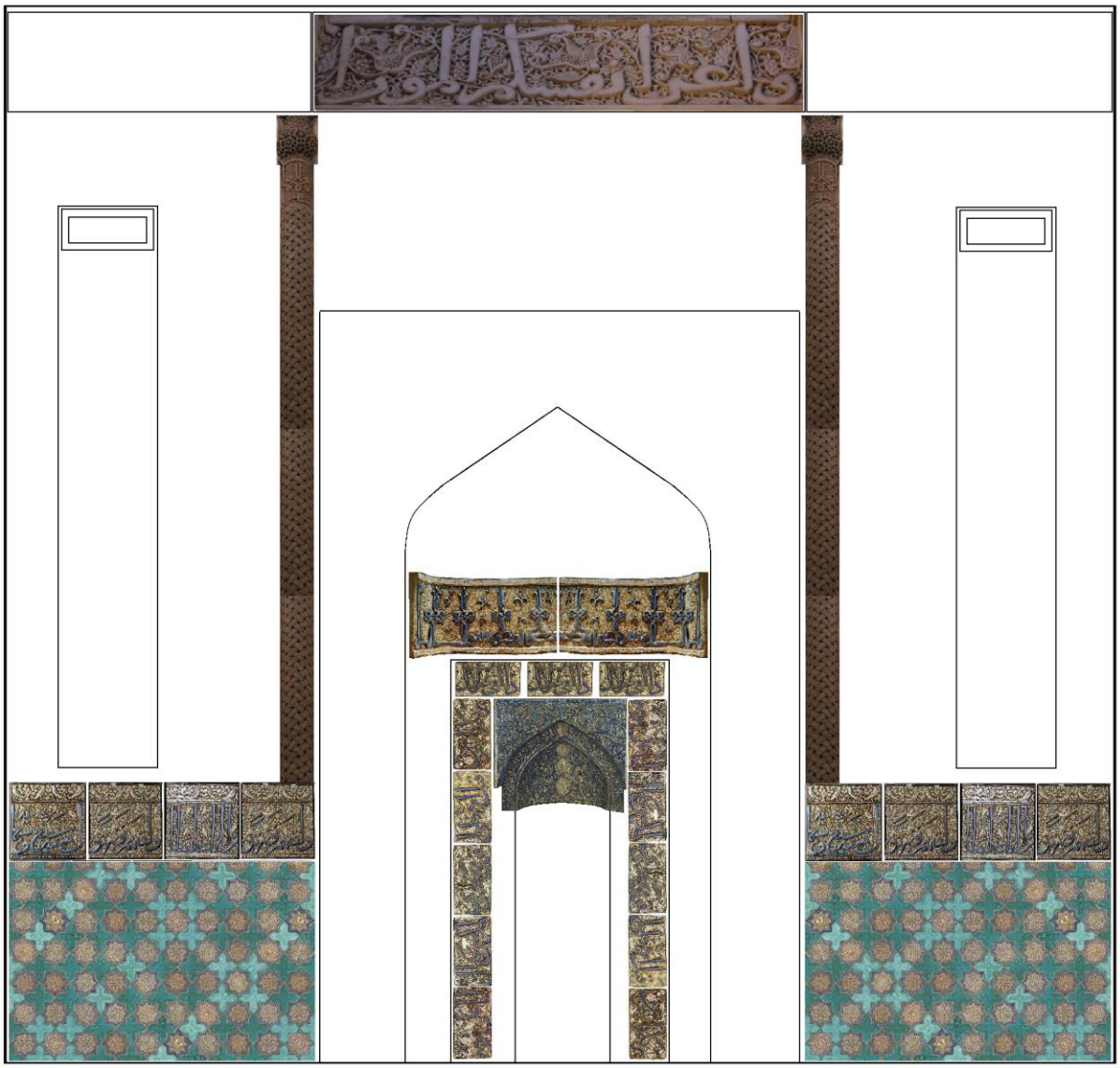

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Figure 9: Partial mock-up of south wall of the tomb section of exhibition

Room 3: Object Display

After exiting the shrine simulacrum, a third space, aligned with the tomb in the same manner as at the complex, will be the final area of the exhibition. This will be where full-size models of the muqarnas cells, as well as related material such as Ilkhanid tiles, coins and manuscript paintings are displayed. The presentation of such objects will provide a richer and more nuanced picture of the material culture of the period during which the tomb was built.[58] There will also be another projector screen with a moving image of the digital 3D model of the tomb interior to provide close-up detail of the upper areas and to demonstrate the true height of the original structure. As with the corridor area, all the objects will be displayed either on the walls, or in cases set into the walls, so as to retain the same sense of movement through the space as there is in the original building, unencumbered by display cases. This final area of the exhibition, measuring 2.5 meters by 3.5 meters, is a truncated version of the corresponding

space to the west of the tomb. This layout gives a total footprint of approximately 100 square meters, with 77 square meters of exhibition space [figure 10].

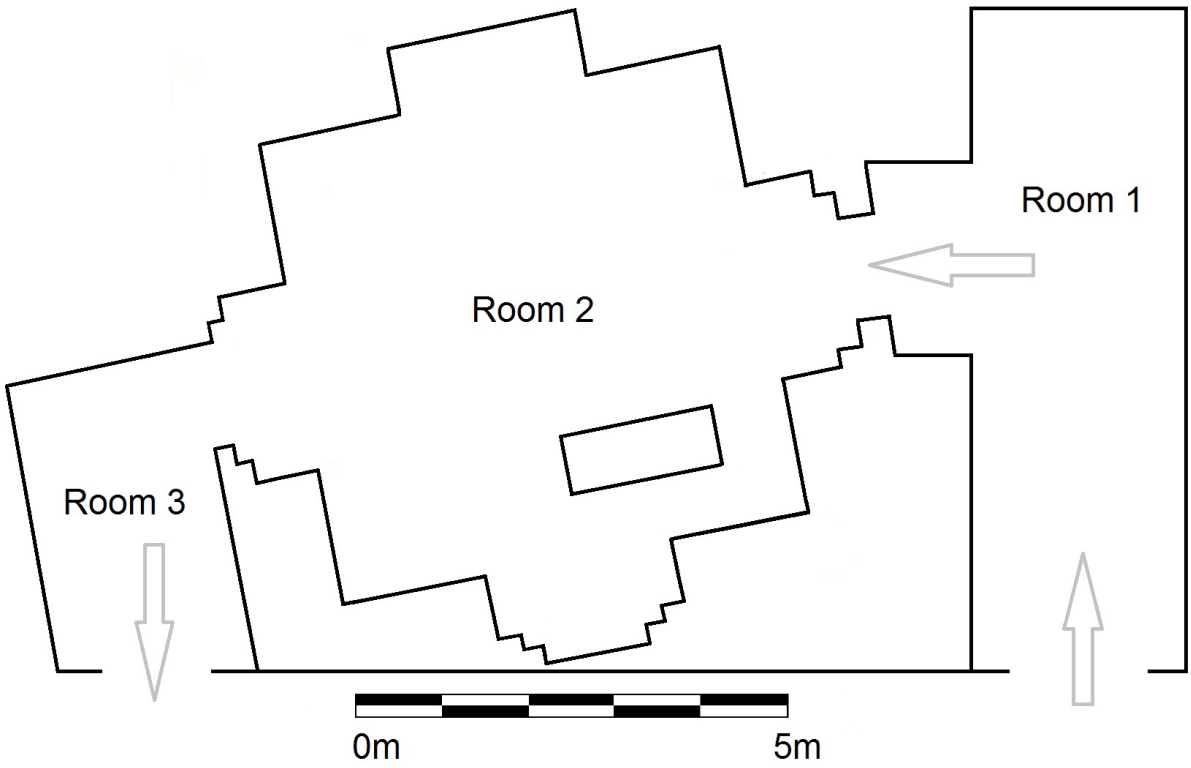

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Figure 10: Floorplan and visitor flow direction of the proposed exhibition

Conclusion

The detailed focus on a single structure, unique in the fact that a significant number of the removed tiles can be associated with their original location, acts as specific point of reference. This allows for the examination of a number of larger issues around the de-contextualisation, acquisition and display of architectural elements. While this specific project delineated above remains hypothetical, the ability to use technology to bring together dispersed elements of buildings and recreate the original aesthetic has been demonstrated to be possible, and can be applied to a large number of other sites. It can also be applied to buildings which have been destroyed, through war, terrorism or natural disasters.[59] The ultimate aim is to give the public as clear a picture as possible of how disparate architectural fragments in museums were once part of a unified aesthetic whole, and to try and fill in some of the blanks caused by the ravages of time.

[1] For details of the exhibition see: ed. Andrea Lermer and Avinoam Shalem, *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition 'Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst' Reconsidered,* (Leiden / Boston, MA: Brill, 2010).
[2] For details of the similar aesthetic seen in many of the galleries currently displaying Islamic art in the USA see: Mary McWilliams, "Subthemes and Overpaint: Exhibiting Islamic Art in American Art Museums", in ed. Benoît Junod, George Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf, *Islamic Art and the Museum,* (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 151-72, especially 158-62.

[3] I am indebted to the two anonymous reviewers, whose insightful comments and suggestions led to several major revisions and improvements to this article.
[4] The aim here is not to attempt to give a history of the building, as it has been done superbly by Sheila Blair in a monograph on the complex (see: Sheila S. Blair, *The Ilkhanid Shrine Complex at Natanz, Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University, 1986). It is that volume from which much of the evidence given in this article is taken.
[5] Stefan Weber, "A Concert of Things: Thoughts on Objects of Islamic Art in the Museum Context", in ed. Benoît Junod, George Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf, *Islamic Art and the Museum,* (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 28-53: 28.
[6] See: article 7 (b) (ii) of the 1970 UNESCO convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property, accessed June 10, 2017, http://www.unesco.org/ne/en/culture/themes/illicit-trafficking-of-cultural-property/1970-convention/text-of-the-convention/. As one of the frieze tiles in the British Museum (G.195) was acquired from the Godman family in 1983, after the 1970 convention came into force, there may well be a legal case for the return of that tile to Natanz. However, the ethics of restitution are complicated by national laws affecting the ability of museums to dispose of items acquired by purchase or bequeath. For restrictions on the British Museum see: The British Museum Act 1963, clause 5, accessed June 10, 2017, http://www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/BM1963Act.pdf.
[7] For analysis of the international legal framework for the restitution of cultural property see Grant Strother, 'Resolving Cultural Property Disputes in the Shadow of the Law', *Harvard Negotiations Law Review* 19 (2014), 335-76: 341-3.
[8] Recent attempts to get away from the, admittedly imperfect, term 'Islamic' have resulted in such tautological names as 'Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. For purposes of brevity, the term 'Islamic' remains the simplest and most easily understood term, by both scholars and the general public alike.
[9] Venetia Porter, *Islamic Tiles,* London: The British Museum Press, 1995), 51, Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1800,* (New Haven, CT / London: Yale University Press, 1995), 11 and Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia 1256-1353,* (New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002), 127 and 268 are just a few of the more recent and most widely circulated examples.
[10] The most detailed study of the significance of the various Qur'anic verses used in the tomb is given in Sheila S. Blair, *The Shrine Complex at Natanz, Iran,* Ph.D thesis, (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University, 1980), 137-43.
[11] For example, there are only four copies of Blair 'Ilkhanid' in libraries in the UK.
[12] Tomoko Masuya, "Persian Tiles on European Walls: Collecting Ilkhanid Tiles in Nineteenth Century Europe", *Ars Orientalis* 30 (2000), 39-54: 41.
[13] Ibid., 42-4.
[14] See: Blair 'Ilkhanid', 133, pl.47.
[15] Masuya 'Persian', 50.
[16] There is a single fragmentary star-shaped lustre tile with a blue border, but the presence of a bird without any evidence of it being defaced in the manner of the upper frieze, and the new mortar around it, means there is a strong possibility that it is a more recent addition. This is in contrast to the monochrome turquoise tiles, which are clearly original.
[17] The site was surveyed by the author in October 2017.
[18] Kianoosh Motaghedi (personal communication, 29 June, 2017).
[19] Due to later alterations to the building, including the blocking up of the west archway, it is hard to know the exact number of tiles which comprised the frieze. However, based on existing visible mortar lines it seems likely that there were originally at least 48 full tiles and 6 half tiles, as well as 8 corner tiles.
[20] Blair 'Ilkhanid', 100. These are now on display in the Louvre.
[21] Accession numbers IR1363, IR1364 and IR1365.
[22] The tile (EAX.3157), measures 178mm in width. The tile is likely to have come from one of the short sections of wall at the sides of the central recesses.
[23] Accession number 12.44.
[24] Accession number 1485-1876.
[25] Accession number ME OA G.1983.195.
[26] Accession number OA 1122.
[27] Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 401.
[28] See: Masuya 'Persian', 42, fig.3. There were six rows of cross tiles, separated by five full star tiles, and a half star tile at the top and bottom, all below the inscription band.
[29] The frieze tiles, featuring Qur'an 76, 1, 7, 13-15 and 17-18, were originally acquired by the Musée d'Art Decoratifs in two tranches, one, AD3290, in 1886, and the others, AD7638a-g, in 1882.
[30] Accession number AD4973.

[31] The arched niche (71-1885), measures 690mm high, 820mm wide and is circa 200mm deep, which is the same size as the hole in the wall of the tomb (Blair 'Ilkhanid' 62).
[32] Ibid., 63.
[33] Blair 'Ilkhanid' 63 and 100 cite an undated publication (Ḥasan Narāqī, *Athār-i Tārīkhī-yi Shahristānha-yi Kāshān wa Naṭanz,* Tehran: 382-405), which has an image of the piece. The piece (469-1888) is datable to c. 1266. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this date and the accession number to my attention.
[34] Blair 'Ilkhanid' 100.
[35] In addition to the verses, two of the tile fragments in the Victoria and Albert Museum have the word [Mu]slimīn (ibid., 100), so there must have been addition elements to the inscription which remain unclear.
[36] The tiles (1494.11/1876, 1494.3/1876, 1494.14/1876, 1494.7/1876, 1494.10/1876, 1494.5/1876 and 1494.15/1876), feature the middle of 36:23, the middle of 36:24, the end of 36:25, the beginning of 36:26, the end of 36:26, 36:27-28 and the early section of 36:28 respectively.
[37] Ibid., 65.
[38] The three-piece panel (09.87), measures 1232mm by 597mm and also features Qur'an 2:137.
[39] Sheila Blair, "A Medieval Persian Builder", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 45.4 (1986), 389-395: 393. The museum acquired the tiles in 1909 from a London based dealer.
[40] Under US law it is not possible to transfer good title to stolen property. This exposes subsequent owners who acquired them in good faith to actions by the original owners (Strother 'Resolving', 345-6). Unfortunately, at government levels cultural objects are usually low priorities when compared with other diplomatic issues (ibid., 366-7).
[41] The Lyon tile is accession number D643.
[42] Similar style incised patterns can be seen on the portal of the complex, but they are carved into plaster with fictive brick lines, rather than into the actual rising joint between bricks.
[43] The decorative carved stucco engaged columns also cover parts of the decorative brickwork, and thus can be seen to postdate the initial phase of construction, although they extend behind the tile frieze, and thus must have been installed before the dado and frieze.
[44] For additional details of the various phases of construction at the shrine see Blair 'Medieval', 394-5.
[45] The exhibition would be suitable for installation in a large number of institutions across the world, including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as well as any other institutions with the desire and a large enough space for it.
[46] The frame of the structure can be constructed of kiln dried lengths of wood with a 90mm x 45mm profile, clad with 10mm thick MDF sheets measuring 1220mm x 2440mm. In addition, the engaged columns can be formed with lengths of rigid plastic pipe, over which printed images of the carved plaster can be applied.
[47] This would require the removal of the large Perspex screens which have been installed inside the tomb in order to preserve the few monochrome turquoise dado tiles which remain in situ.
[48] Sheila S. Blair, "The Octagonal pavilion at Natanz, A Re-examination of Early Islamic Architecture in Iran", *Muqarnas* 1 (1983), 69-94: 70.
[49] Although the entrance to the shrine from the corridor in Natanz is up steps, in order to allow for as much height in the tomb area as possible, to simulate the claustrophobic effect of the small area and great height, this feature will be omitted from the proposed exhibition.
[50] For best practice regarding the writing of gallery text see: Lucy Trench, *Gallery text at the V&A: A Ten Point Guide,* accessed June 5, 2017, http://www.vam.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/238077/Gallery-Text-at-the-V-and-A-Ten-Point-Guide-Aug-2013.pdf. For details of some of the current institutional challenges concerning the writing of gallery text in museums displaying Islamic art, see: McWilliams 'Subthemes', 163-4.
[51] For details of the life of Murdoch Smith and his time collecting objects for the Victoria & Albert Museum while he was director of the Persian telegraph company see: Jennifer Scare, "Travels with telegraph and tiles in Persia; from the private papers of Major-General Sir Robert Murdoch Smith", *Art and Archaeology Research Papers* 3 (1973): 70-81.
[52] For examples of such images see: Figure 1 as well as Blair 'Ilkhanid', especially 133, pls.46 and 47, and Godard 'Natanz', 87-88, pls.59 and 60.
[53] Qur'an 3:162-164 makes the distinction between the sinners who have wronged God and who will go to hell, and the believers, who were sent His Messenger to teach them wisdom (Haleem 'Qur'an', 46).
[54] André Godard, "Naṭanz", *Athār-é Īrān* 1:1 (1936), 75-106: 92.
[55] Blair 'Ilkhanid', 61-62.
[56] Godard 'Natanz', 92.
[57] By having both ambient lighting and a single bright light source moving around in a circle above the ceiling with the cut outs for the window, the effect of moving sunlight experienced so strongly in the building can be reproduced.

[58] The exact layout will depend on the specific space in which the display takes place, as will the items on display, which will change, depending on what relevant items, such as tiles, coins and manuscript pages, are available for display in the various institutions.
[59] See: Richard McClary, "Remembering the Imam Yaḥyā ibn al-Qāsim *mashhad* in Mosul", *Iraq* 79 (2017), 1-26 for a detailed study of an example of a recently destroyed building which could be recreated digitally.